

**THE PRACTICAL LIFE,
THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE,
AND THE PERFECT *EUDAIMONIA*
IN ARISTOTLE'S
NICOMACHEAN ETHICS 10.7-8**

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ABSTRACT: Two views continue to be defended today. One is that the account of *eudaimonia* in *EN 10* is *inconsistent* with claims made about it in other books of the work. The other view is that the account in *EN 10* is consistent with other claims made in the other books because Aristotle presents one account of perfect *eudaimonia* by portraying it as consisting solely in contemplative activity. I call this view the intellectualist interpretation. I then argue that neither view is correct because although Aristotle's position is consistent, he does not hold that the perfect *eudaimonia* for a human being involves nothing but excellent theoretical activity. His philosopher possesses and exercises the moral excellences and practical wisdom and so some portion of his happiness consists in these activities as well as contemplative activity.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle, Contemplation, Intellectual Virtue, *Eudaimonia*

Nicomachean Ethics (*EN*) 10.7-8 contains Aristotle's final remarks in this work about his view of the nature of happiness (*eudaimonia*). The account relies on an extended treatment of the value of the theoretical or contemplative life as compared to the value of the practical or political life. I hope to show that a careful examination of these final chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics* helps to reveal that there is an overlooked but reasonable alternative to the ways in which the majority of researchers today understand the import of Aristotle's account of *eudaimonia* in *EN 10*. Since it does not seem to be an exaggeration to say that the texts of the *Nicomachean Ethics* discussed in this paper have received as much or more attention in the past 50 years as any other texts of ancient Greek philosophy, it will not be possible in the space of the paper both to defend my interpretation of the texts and demonstrate how and why it should be judged to be a more acceptable interpretation than the numerous and distinct views currently on offer. I will, however, provide

some general remarks about how the view favored here differs from the *kinds* of interpretation that most scholars support today and then leave it to the reader to decide whether the position I defend does or does not square better with their own reading of Aristotle.

For generations scholars have been divided over precisely how to interpret what Aristotle says about *eudaimonia* in *EN* 10 and how to relate his account of it here to what he says or implies about it in the other books of the *EN*. Since the debate is so familiar, it would be tedious, if not impossible, to provide all of the details of its history here. But it will be useful for the purpose of explaining my position to describe, briefly, five views that have been most frequently defended. One is that the argument of 10.7-8 is inconsistent with the claims made about *eudaimonia* in the other books of the treatise.¹ The reasons offered for this judgement differ somewhat from one interpreter to another, but the following consideration is one that is frequently advanced by those who take the *EN* to end with an incoherent theory of the human good. In an earlier paper, Christopher Rowe expressed the point this way:

X.7... proposes a life exclusively devoted to *theōria*, which it directly contrasts with the life of practical activity, and of the exercise of the practical *aretai*. Yet it may be said at once that this position is wholly anomalous. ... [A]s is obvious, nearly the whole of the rest of the *EN* has centred on the practical *aretai* which are here so cavalierly devalued, on the apparent understanding that these are at least central to *eudaimonia*; and indeed we find Aristotle resuming the same standpoint, without apology, in the final chapter of book X, immediately after rounding off his remarks on the superiority of the theoretical life at the end of chapter 8. ... [I]t appears that Aristotle thinks it perfectly reasonable to argue simultaneously that practical activity of the right kind is essential to *eudaimonia*, and that *eudaimonia* really—and exclusively—consists in theoretical activity. How can that be?²

¹ See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), 373-377; Jonathan Lear, *The Desire to Understand* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 309-320; Christopher Rowe, "The Good for Man in Aristotle's *Ethics* and *Politics*," in *Studi sull'etica di Aristotele*, ed. Antonina M. Alberti (Napoli: Bibliopolis, 1990), 193-225, especially 217.

² Rowe, "The Good for Man," 218. Rowe has now abandoned this view and accepted an interpretation that is similar to the one we find in Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). My own interpretation is similar to Broadie's, so I am very happy to know that Rowe, an eminent scholar, now accepts an interpretation of Aristotle close to the one I have been defending for some years now. See his "The Best Life According to Aristotle (and Plato): A Reconsideration," in *Theoria: Studies on the Status and Meaning of Contemplation in Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. Pierre Destrée and Marco Zingano (Louvain-La-Neuve: Peeters, 2014), 273-

The Practical Life, the Contemplative Life, and the Perfect *Eudaimonia*

The complaint here is that in numerous passages throughout the *EN*, Aristotle clearly states or implies that excellent practical activity (i.e., practically wise and morally virtuous activity) is, at the very least, a constituent of the highest good for human beings, an essential component of human *eudaimonia*. But in 10.7-8, the highest human good, the perfect or complete happiness, seems to turn out to be constituted by contemplative activity (*theōria*) alone. Let us call this view the Inconsistency Interpretation.

Other interpreters, maintain that the argument of book 10 *is* consistent with the other parts of the *EN*.³ They hold that book 10 defends an Intellectualist Conception of *eudaimonia*, but it is an intellectualist position that coheres well with the rest of the treatise. In my view, Kraut⁴ and Richardson Lear⁵ have produced the most ingenious and detailed defenses of this sort of reading, so in what follows I will take abstract and generalized versions of their positions to represent what I am calling the Intellectualist Interpretation. According to the view, Aristotle believes, throughout the *EN*, that (1) the best life for a human being is contemplative or philosophical activity engaged in within a complete and substantial period of life; (2) the philosopher rightly takes the practical virtues to be intrinsic goods, and he fully possesses these virtues himself; (3) the philosopher correctly judges that the exercise of the practical virtues does not constitute any part of his *eudaimonia*, for he also correctly judges that his *eudaimonia* consists in contemplation alone; but (4) he recognizes, nevertheless, that a life whose ultimate end consists in the exercise of

286.

³ Among these interpreters, see Anthony Kenny, *Aristotle on the Perfect Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); Robert Heinaman, "Eudaimonia and Self-sufficiency in the Nicomachean Ethics", *Phronesis*, Vol. 33, no. 1 (1988): 31-53; Richard Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); C.D.C. Reeve, *Practices of Reason: Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* (Clarendon Press, 1995), Joachim Aufderheide, "The Content of Happiness: a New Case for *Theōria*", in *The Highest Good in Aristotle and Kant*, ed. Joachim Aufderheide and Ralf M. Bader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); David Charles, "Aristotle on Well-Being and Intellectual Contemplation," *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 73*, no. 1 (1999): 205-223; John M. Cooper, "Plato and Aristotle on 'Finality' and 'Sufficiency'," in *Knowledge, Nature, and the Good: Essays on Ancient Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 270-308; Gavin Lawrence, "Snakes in Paradise: Problems in the Ideal Life", *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. XLIII Supplement (2005): 126-165 and David Roochnik, "Aristotle's Defense of the Theoretical Life," *Review of Metaphysics*, 61, no. 4 (2008): 711-735.

⁴ Kraut, *Aristotle on the Human Good*.

⁵ Richardson Lear, *Happy Lives and the Highest Good* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Timothy Roche

the practical virtues is good enough to count as a happy life, for it involves an excellent use of reason and aims at truth, and (5) the exercise of the practical virtues causally promotes (Kraut) or is an approximation of the philosopher's own superbly rational life (Richardson Lear).⁶

A third interpretation maintains that *eudaimonia* consists in the totality of intrinsic goods, including both excellent practical activity as well as excellent theoretical activity. The original defender of this 'inclusive end' view was John Ackrill (cf. his "Aristotle on Eudaimonia"); a less extreme variant of this kind of interpretation was proposed by David Keyt.⁷ He argued that *eudaimonia*, for Aristotle, does not consist in the totality of intrinsic goods, but only in both excellent contemplative activity and excellent practical activity. He called this the 'superstructure' view. My interpretation is similar to Keyt's in some ways and very different in other ways.⁸

⁶ Richardson Lear, *Happy Lives*, presents a detailed account of how she thinks the notion of teleological approximation works inside and outside of the *EN*. My view is that there is scant evidence that Aristotle believed, in the *EN*, that excellent practical activities are good (and indeed intrinsically good) *because* they approximate excellent theoretical activities. First, I can find no unquestionable textual support for this position in *EN* 10 or elsewhere in the *EN*. In fact, Richardson Lear concedes this point (p. 90) but oddly is not troubled by it. Second, although she concedes that Aristotle holds that excellent practical activities, such as the exercise of the moral virtues, are intrinsically valuable, her interpretation implies that the value of such activities *derives from* the value they inherit from excellent theoretical activity. But it is entirely unclear how, on her interpretation, we are to understand how the value of excellent practical activities can be intrinsic to them rather than extrinsic to them. A further objection to Richardson Lear's position is that it proves too much: the crafts, according to Aristotle, involve reason and truthfulness too (*EN* 6.3, 1139b14-17 and 6.4, 1140a20-21) and therefore should also approximate excellent theoretical activity and thus constitute some form of *eudaimonia*. But Aristotle, we know, never suggests such a thing. On the contrary, in the *Politics*, he makes it clear that those who occupy themselves with the crafts are incapable of virtue and therefore *eudaimonia* (7.9, 1328b39ff., 1329a19-21, 8.2, 1337b8-11).

⁷ "Intellectualism in Aristotle," in *Essays in Ancient Greek Philosophy*, vol. 2, ed. J.P. Anton and A. Preus (Albany, New York SUNY Press, 1983), 364-387. For Ackrill's paper, see *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics*, ed. A. O. Rorty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 15-34.

⁸ Keyt believed that the references to a perfect and secondary *eudaimonia* in *EN* 10 were to be understood as different aspects of a single conception of *eudaimonia*. I think this is incorrect and Aristotle means what he says: there are two different types of *eudaimonia*. On the other hand, I believe that the perfectly happy life, for Aristotle, includes not only contemplative activity but excellent moral activity as well, and so the perfectly happy life captures much of what Keyt regarded as the alleged single type of happy life he thought Aristotle was discussing in *EN* 10.

The Practical Life, the Contemplative Life, and the Perfect *Eudaimonia*

A recent interpretation may be distinct from those already considered, but it is difficult to say since it has some features that are similar to other views that have been defended. The position holds that contemplation is a divine good while morally excellent and politically wise activity is a purely human good. Those who can incorporate both types of activity in their lives will realize the perfect *eudaimonia* whereas those who can only achieve a life organized around excellent political activity can achieve only the secondary form of *eudaimonia*.⁹

Although I disagree, in some way or other, with all of the foregoing interpretations, my view is much closer to the interpretations of Broadie,¹⁰ Bush¹¹ and Dahl¹² than any of the others. My disagreement with Broadie, Bush, and Dahl has to do primarily with their inclusion of grand scale excellent political activity into the perfectly *eudaimon* life (which I think is inconsistent with Aristotle's claim that the contemplative life is more self-sufficient than the political life). But I agree with these interpreters, against others, that some form of practically excellent activity must be a component of the perfectly happy human life.

It is clear that both the Inconsistency Interpretation and the Intellectualist Interpretation share the view that in *EN* 10 Aristotle believes that the happiness of the philosopher can be constituted only by contemplative activity. However, I believe that there are good reasons to question this view and hold instead that some part of the happiness found in the life of Aristotle's philosopher is constituted by practically wise and morally virtuous activities. Note, first, that when Aristotle concludes his function argument in *EN* 1.7, he adds that excellent activity must occur over a complete life in order for *eudaimonia* to be achieved (a complete life is not necessarily a life that involves a continuity of happiness or one that is typically lengthy since *EN* 1.8-11 reveals that one can lose and regain one's happiness and one's relatively short adult life might be a happy one). Consequently, *eudaimonia cannot* consist merely in any episodes of particular sorts of excellent activity. It must involve excellent activity in a complete life, as Broadie and Dahl have shown.¹³

⁹ This is the interpretation offered by Bush.

¹⁰ Sarah Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, and Sarah Broadie and Christopher Rowe, *Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

¹¹ Stephen Bush, "Divine and Human Happiness in the *Nicomachean Ethics*," *Philosophical Review* 117, no. 1 (2008): 49-75.

¹² Dahl, N. O. "Contemplation and eudaimonia in the *Nicomachean Ethics*," in *Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics. A Critical Guide*, ed. Jon Miller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹³ See Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*, and Dahl, "Contemplation and *Eudaimonia*".

Furthermore, to understand what Aristotle is up to in *EN*10, it is necessary to recall what was said earlier in book 1. In both *EN* 1 and *Eudemian Ethics* (*EE*) 1, Aristotle refers to what seems to have been a traditional, but still current, starting-point for discussions about the nature of the human good or *eudaimonia*. This is the renowned image of the three prominent or most favored types of life: “we see three lives”, he says, “which all who have the resources choose to live, the political [life], the philosophical [life], and the [life] of enjoyment (*politikon*, *philosophon*, *apolaustikon*).¹⁴ With each of these lives Aristotle associates a particular good an agent’s desire for which, and pursuit of which, characterizes the life, and one or another historical figure whose life can be subsumed under one of the three headings. Thus, the apolaustic life is typified by the pursuit of, and desire for, bodily pleasure and play, and Aristotle points to both the Assyrian king Sardanapallus and a certain Smindyrides of Sybara as examples of those who pursued such a life. The good that is of major concern in the political life turns out to be a certain form of excellent practical activity, providing that we are talking about a good or “true” political life (otherwise ends such money, honor, and gaining unfair advantage over others are associated with this life).¹⁵ Aristotle does not explicitly connect a particular individual with the political life in his discussions of the three lives. However, remarks made elsewhere indicate that he would count such men as Solon and Pericles among those who had lived good lives of this type.¹⁶ The philosophical or theoretical life is typified by a concern with the good of contemplative wisdom. Aristotle’s favorite example of a person who had lived the philosophical life is Anaxagoras. Like Aristotle himself, Anaxagoras abandoned his life as a citizen of his native city¹⁷ in order to study philosophy in the city of Athens as a *metoikos* (*metic*, resident alien). According to the biographical tradition, Anaxagoras spent about thirty years in Athens where he became a friend and teacher of Pericles. However, he fled Athens when charges of impiety and Medism were brought against him by some of Pericles’ political enemies. He then took up residence in the city of Lampsacus¹⁸, where he continued to engage in philosophical contemplation until his death. According to Aristotle, despite having the status of a *xenos* (guest-friend) in

¹⁴ *EE* 1.4, 1215a35–b1; cf. *EN* 1.5, 1095b14–1096a5.

¹⁵ See *EN* 1.13, 1102a7–10; cf. *EN* 1.9, 1099b28–32, *EE* 1216a24–27.

¹⁶ Pericles: *EN* 6.5, 1140b7–11; Solon: *EN* 10.9, 1179a9–13 where Aristotle uses Solon’s testimony to confirm his argument. Aristotle implies that he takes Solon to be wise at a16–17.

¹⁷ Clazomenae (now Urla).

¹⁸ Present day Lapseki.

the city, the people of Lampsacus gave him a public burial in honor of his theoretical wisdom.¹⁹

I believe the image of the three favored types of life explains the structure of the argument we find at the end of the *EN*, specifically the argument that runs from chapters 6 through 8 of book 10. At the beginning of *EN* 10.6, Aristotle says: “We have discussed matters pertaining to the virtues, friendships, and pleasures. It remains for us to discuss *eudaimonia* in outline.”²⁰ In 10.6, Aristotle discusses and refutes the view that *eudaimonia* consists in a life devoted to the pleasures of play or amusement; after this, in 10.7-8, he argues that *theōria* is (or is the central component of) the perfect or complete happiness (*hē teleia eudaimonia*) and thus the life of the intellect (*ho kata ton noun bios*) is the happiest life for a human being.²¹ He contrasts this philosophical life with one he calls “the life in accordance with the other excellence” (*ho kata tēn allēn aretēn*: *EN* 10.8, 1178a9), but maintains that the latter type of life deserves to be called happy as well, though only in a secondary way (*deuterōs*). I propose that the life that is happy in a secondary way is a certain species of the practical life, *viz.*, an excellent political life. Unless this is correct, it is difficult to see how Aristotle can be understood to conclude his account of *eudaimonia* in the *EN* with his answer to the question raised in book 1: which of the three favored types of life is happy? And if the life in accordance with the other excellence is not a life of excellent political activity, then what might it be? To say that it is a life devoted to the exercise of the practical excellences *simpliciter*, would seem to require us to embrace the inconsistency interpretation. For on this reading, Aristotle would be contrasting the contemplative life with a life of morally excellent and practically wise activities, and then in elevating the contemplative life above *this* life, he would indicate that there is a form of human happiness that can be enjoyed by a person bereft of moral excellence and practical wisdom. This seems to be an intolerable result and thus one we should avoid embracing unless an alternative interpretation proves to be implausible.

¹⁹ *Rh.* 2.23, 1398b16-17.

²⁰ 1176a30-32.

²¹ *EN* 10.7, 1177b24-25, 1178a6-8. By saying that *theōria* is the perfect happiness I take Aristotle to mean that contemplation is the good that typifies the life that best or most fully satisfies the features that are associated with a happy life (cf. Broadie, 1991). It is the highest or most desirable aim of the person to whom we ascribe supreme or unqualified happiness. However, it is not the only aim of such a person. As I argue in the paper, excellent practical activity is also a fundamental aim of the person living the supremely happy life. Cf. note 40.

However, there do appear to be passages throughout 10. 7-8 that imply a sharp contrast not merely between a philosophical life and a good political life, but a philosophical life and *any* life that counts as an excellent practical one. For example, Aristotle maintains that one reason to equate the perfect *eudaimonia* with *theōria* is that *theōria* is the most self-sufficient activity. He defends his claim with the following remarks:

The wise man, no less than the just one and all the rest, requires the necessities of life; but, given an adequate supply of these, the just man also needs people with and towards whom he can perform just actions, and similarly with the temperate man, the brave man, and each of the others; but the wise man can engage in contemplation by himself, and the wiser he is, the more he can do it. No doubt he does it better with the help of fellow workers; but for all that he is the most self-sufficient of men.²²

It seems clear that this passage, and others like them,²³ have helped to produce Christopher Rowe's earlier view that *EN*10.7 "...proposes a life exclusively devoted to *theōria*, which it directly contrasts with *the life of practical activity*, and of *the exercise of the practical aretai*" (quoted above, with my emphases).²⁴ But do these passages show that the philosophical life is being distinguished from *any life that counts as a good practical life*? Moreover, do they suggest that none of the happiness within the philosophical life can be constituted by excellent practical activity? My contention is that they do not.

²² 1177a28-b1; cf. 1178a28-34.

²³ For example, Aristotle distinguishes between "practical [activities]" and "contemplating" (at 1177b2-4) and between "actions in accordance with the [practical] excellences" and the "activity of the [theoretical] intellect" (at 1177b16-20). At the beginning of 10.8 Aristotle says that "the [life] in accordance with the other excellence will be happy in a secondary way, because the activities in accordance with it are human" (1178a9-10); he then defends the claim that activities in accordance with the "other virtue" are human by arguing that "just and brave acts and the others in accordance with the excellences in regard to our dealings with one another...and in the feelings too...all appear to be human" (1178a10-14). After this, Aristotle maintains, as he did in book 6, that the possession of practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) entails the possession of the moral excellences, and vice versa (1178a16-22). So it certainly looks as if the "other excellence" Aristotle is distinguishing here from theoretical wisdom is the totality of the practical excellences—*phronēsis* and the *ēthikai aretai*.

²⁴ Rowe now has accepted Broadie's interpretation. See Christopher J. Rowe, "The Best Life According to Aristotle (and Plato). A Reconsideration," in *The Ways of Life in Classical Political Philosophy*, ed. F.L. Lisi (Madrid: Academia Verlag, Sankt Augustin, 2004), 121-133.

The Practical Life, the Contemplative Life, and the Perfect *Eudaimonia*

In what is nearly the first half of 10.7,²⁵ Aristotle does contrast contemplation with excellent practical activity with respect to various features that are associated with *eudaimonia*. He argues *either* that some of these features may be ascribed to *theōria* but not to excellent practical activities *or* that some of them apply to *theōria* to a greater degree than they apply to excellent practical activities. After presenting a number of arguments along these lines, Aristotle considers another point that helps move his discussion forward. He writes:

Eudaimonia seems to be [found in] leisure (*scholē*), for we occupy ourselves so that we may have leisure and we make war so that we may bring about peace. Now the activity of the practical virtues occurs in politics or war, and actions with respect these [affairs] seem to be without leisure (*ascholos*). Military actions are completely so.... But the activity of the politician (*ho politikos*) is also without leisure...Therefore...among the actions in accordance with the virtues those in politics and war are pre-eminently fine and great (*kallos kai megethos*); but they are without leisure....²⁶

Aristotle goes on to argue that contemplation, rather than political activity, is (or is more closely) linked with leisure, self-sufficiency, and “the other things assigned to the supremely happy person”.²⁷ He then infers that “the perfect happiness for a human being will be this [activity]”.²⁸

I have said that the life that Aristotle calls happy “in a secondary way” is the good *political life* and not merely any life in which good *practical* activity is included as an aim. One reason to accept this interpretation has now surfaced. For Aristotle has just inferred that *theōria* is the perfect *eudaimonia* from the fact that it is *theōria*, rather than *political activity*, that is most closely associated with the attributes that attach to being supremely happy. Aristotle calls the life typified by *theōria* “the life of the intellect.” But, in 10.7-8, the life that is “happy in a secondary way” is the only life that Aristotle contrasts with the life of the intellect. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that it is good political activity that typifies the life that is happy in a secondary way.²⁹ A passage in 10.8 supplies further support for this conclusion. Aristotle writes:

²⁵ 1177a12-b4.

²⁶ 1177b4-18.

²⁷ 1177b18-24.

²⁸ 1177b24-25: *hē teleia eudaimonia autē an eiē anthropōu*.

²⁹ At this point one might wonder why Aristotle seems to compare contemplation to excellent practical activity quite generally if his intention is to distinguish the philosophical life from an excellent *political life*. In reply to this question, I will note, first, that in the *Politics* Aristotle uses

The virtues of the composite are human; thus both the life and the happiness in accordance with these [are human]. But the happiness of the intellect is separate. ...It would seem, also, to stand in little need of external resources or less than [the happiness/the virtue?] of character (*tēs ēthikēs*). For both require the necessities [of life] and in equal measure, even if the politician (*politikos*) labors more about the body and things of that sort. For in this there may be little difference. But with respect to their activities, there will be a great difference.³⁰

Although there are questions about how to translate and interpret much of this notorious passage, here we need only focus on one obvious fact about it: there is a smooth transition in the passage from talk about the external resources needed to engage in activities expressing an excellent character (*ho ēthikos*) to talk about the activities of the politician. The best explanation for this fact, I think, is that Aristotle is taking an excellent political life to be the specific type of excellent practical life to which he is comparing the philosophical life.

That Aristotle regards the political life as a species of the practical life is beyond question. In *EN* 6.8, he claims that *politikē* (the virtue of the excellent politician) is one form of *phronēsis*. It is practical wisdom operating in regard to the good of the *polis* and is thus distinguished from the use of practical wisdom in regard to the good of the self or the individual alone (and to which popular discourse has incorrectly restricted the term). *Politikē*, as Aristotle understands it, is the intellectual virtue that is exercised in the practical domains of legislation, deliberation, and judicature.³¹ In the *Politics*, Aristotle tells us that an excellent ruler is good and is practically wise (*phronimos*)³²; in fact, he declares that “*phronēsis* is the only distinctive virtue (*idios aretē*) of the ruler.”³³ Moreover, he claims that a

the expressions “political life” and “practical life” interchangeably (cf. *Pol.* 7. 2, 1324a27). Apparently, the debate between advocates of the political life and advocates of the philosophical life was typically referred to as a debate between proponents of the practical life and proponents of the philosophical life (see Timothy Roche, “The Private Moral Life of Aristotle’s Philosopher: A Defense of a Non-Intellectualist Interpretation of Nicomachean Ethics 10.7-8,” in *Contemplation in Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Pierre Destrée and Marco Zingano (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 222ff.) for additional evidence about the manner in which this debate was framed). Secondly, Aristotle’s own conception of a good political life can easily explain why he thinks of it as a life in accordance with the practical virtues. In particular, he thinks of political virtue as a certain form of practical wisdom. See pp. 40-41.

³⁰ 1178a20-28.

³¹ 1141b23-1142a10.

³² 3.4, 1277a13-15.

³³ 1277b25-26.

ruler must have complete moral excellence,³⁴ a point we would expect him to make if the *Politics* is consistent with the *EN* on the relationship between practical wisdom and moral excellence. In Aristotle's view, then, the excellent politician is involved in the project of realizing not merely his own personal good but the good for his entire *polis*.³⁵ Thus, Aristotle's good politician exercises the practical excellences, but he does so on a grand scale. He engages in virtuous activity in the public arena and his actions are for the sake of the well being of his entire political community. This is why Aristotle believes that excellent political actions are "pre-eminently fine and great" (*kallos kai megethos*; cf. quoted passage on p. 39). It is also part of the explanation for why Aristotle sometimes writes as if he is contrasting the theoretical life with any life devoted to morally excellent and practically wise activities.³⁶ For the morally excellent and practically wise activities that can serve as the primary component of a happy life must be pre-eminently fine and great to have such a consequential implication for a human life.

However, the fact that virtuous political actions are pre-eminently fine and great actions implies that a political life must be both less self-sufficient than, and less leisurely than, a philosophical life. Aristotle tells us that "for actions many things are needed, and the greater and finer [the actions] the more numerous are the things [needed]".³⁷ The politician, in order to be successful, must be concerned with his own possession and regular use of a considerable number of external goods, such as wealth, political friends, honor, power, etc. He also needs to be concerned with acquiring external goods for his *polis*, for he must see to it that the citizens of his *polis* have an opportunity to realize as much happiness for themselves as is possible given their natures and the conditions that have shaped their political system.³⁸

³⁴ 1.13, 1260a17-18.

³⁵ Cf. 1.2, 1094b7-10, 1.9, 1099b28-32, 1.13, 1102a7-10.

³⁶ The other elements of the explanation have to do first, with the longstanding dispute between the advocates of the political life (understood as a life of *praxis*) and the advocates of the philosophical life (understood as a life of *theoria* or the life of the spectator). Cf. Plato, *Gorgias* 484c-486d, 500c1-d4, *Republic* 592a3-b4, *Theatetus* 172c-177b. Second, the fundamental component of a happy life is a certain sort of action or activity for Aristotle. Since excellent political activity involves certain sorts of practically wise, just, magnificent, even-tempered acts, etc. it is easy to appear to refer to practical activity in general rather than the more specific activity of politics when discussing the excellent political life.

³⁷ 1178b1-3: *pros de tas praxeis pollōn deitai kai osō an meizous kai kallious*.

³⁸ Cf. *EN* 1094a26-1094b11, 1099b28-32, 1102a7-10, 1129b14-17, 1130b23-29, 1160a8-14, 1163b5-12, *Pol.* 1280b29-1281a8, 1282b14-18, 7.5-6, 8-9 (esp. 1329a17-26), 10-12, 13 (esp. 1332a7-32).

Timothy Roche

Happiness for a *polis*, like happiness for an individual, depends upon an adequate supply of external goods.³⁹ The politician must do whatever he can to help his *polis* to acquire, preserve, and properly employ such goods. Thus, the politician's life is wrapped up with the pursuit of external goods in a way that the philosopher's life is not.

But the politician's dependence on, and concern with, a large number of external goods reveals that Aristotle's philosophical life cannot be a political life as well (at least it is unlikely to be so within deviant political regimes where the extensive concern with external goods and the demands of political office may be so time-consuming and complex as to preclude rigorous and sustained theoretical activity). If Aristotle were to take his philosopher to live a political life as well as a philosophical life, then he could not say, as he does, that the philosopher enjoys a greater degree of self-sufficiency and leisure than the politician enjoys. For any lack of self-sufficiency and leisure that attaches to the political life would then attach equally to the philosophical life, and the contrast between the two lives, and hence an important reason for ranking the philosophical life as happier than the political life, would be obliterated. It is on this point that my interpretation must be distinguished from those advocated by Broadie,⁴⁰ Bush,⁴¹ and Dahl.⁴²

However, Aristotle makes it perfectly clear that his philosopher does aim at excellent practical activity. He tells us that in so far as a philosopher is "a human being and lives with many others, he chooses to act in accordance with virtue; for he will need those sorts of things [i.e., external goods] towards living a human life".⁴³ Aristotle is claiming here that the philosopher will choose to act in accordance with the moral virtues and therefore will also pursue the external goods that are needed to exercise those virtues, such as money, for the sake of acting generously and justly, strength, for the sake of acting bravely, and opportunity, for the sake of acting temperately.⁴⁴ In fact, Aristotle implies that the philosopher will choose to pursue these external goods even though his attention to them can be regarded as impediments (*empodia*) to his contemplative activity.⁴⁵

³⁹ See, for example, *EN* 1099a31-b7, *Pol.* 1329a17-19, 1323a40-41, 1332a7-29.

⁴⁰ Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle*.

⁴¹ Bush, "Divine and Human Happiness."

⁴² Dahl, "Contemplation and *Eudaimonia*."

⁴³ 1178b5-7.

⁴⁴ 1178a28-34.

⁴⁵ 1178b3-5.

The Practical Life, the Contemplative Life, and the Perfect *Eudaimonia*

If the philosopher engages in excellent practical activity, but does not do so as a good politician (i.e., as a person who holds political office and acts in accordance with the practical virtues for the sake of the common benefit of the citizens of his *polis*), then he must do so in the context of his *private* life. His excellent practical activities for the most part will be performed with, and directed towards, his family, friends, and associates.⁴⁶ But now two questions arise. First, is book 10 implying that the philosopher will possess and exercise the practical virtues or is it merely indicating that the philosopher will perform actions that are compatible with the practical virtues, virtues that he does *not* possess?⁴⁷ And second, will the philosopher's good practical activity actually *constitute* any happiness within his life, or does it only contribute to his happiness in the manner of an instrumental means? My position is that Aristotle's philosopher will possess the practical virtues and his exercise of these virtues will constitute some of the happiness in his life. I cannot fully defend these claims here (because that would require far ranging discussions of other parts of Aristotle's moral and political philosophy than would

⁴⁶ On this interpretation, the philosopher will pursue external goods in order to engage in excellent practical activity beyond what is strictly necessary for his contemplation. Therefore, he will enjoy a lesser degree of self-sufficiency and leisure than he would have had if he had engaged in practical activity only to secure the external goods required for his contemplation. This does not generate the problem alluded to above, viz., that on such a reading the contrast between "the life of the intellect" and "the life in accordance with the other excellence" would be effaced. For "the life of the intellect" properly understood includes the exercise of the practical excellences almost exclusively within the domain of the philosopher's private affairs, whereas "the life in accordance with the other excellence" involves the exercise of the practical excellences on a grand scale. Since the political life involves a greater dependence upon external goods than the life of the intellect properly understood (i.e., a philosophical life that includes the exercise of excellent practical activities in the *private* domain), it remains less self-sufficient and less leisurely than the life of the intellect.

⁴⁷ John Cooper once held the view that Aristotle's philosopher will engage in action that is compatible with moral excellence, but not action that *expresses*, or is a genuine exercise of, the state of moral excellence. Cooper held this view because he thought that "anyone who organizes his life from the intellectualist outlook cannot care about such actions in the way a truly just or temperate or liberal man does." He claimed that Aristotle's philosopher "will not possess the social virtues, or any other virtues, because he will lack the kind of commitment to this kind of activity that is an essential characteristic of the virtuous person" (*Reason and Human Good in Aristotle* (Cambridge, Mass., 1975), 164). But Cooper abandoned this reading and the majority of contemporary proponents of the intellectualist interpretation have rejected it as well. (Recently, however, he appears to have leaned somewhat back towards the more extreme form of the intellectualist view. See Cooper, "Plato and Aristotle on 'Finality'".)

Timothy Roche

be possible within the limits of this paper) but I will attempt to explain them more fully and present some of my reasons for making them.

First, consider the following passage from book 10:

But being a human being he [the person who engages in *theōria* will also need external prosperity; for his nature is not self-sufficient for contemplation, but his body also must be healthy, and food and other attention must be provided. Still, even if it is not possible to be supremely happy without the external goods, one must not think that he who is to be happy will need many things or great things (*pollōn kai megalōn*). For self-sufficiency and action do not depend on excess and it is possible to perform fine actions (*prattein ta kala*) even if one does not rule earth and sea; for even from moderate powers one can act in accordance with virtue. This is plain to see; for private persons (*hoi idiōtai*) seem to perform decent actions (*ta epieikē prattein*) not less but even more than those in positions of power (*dunastai*). It is enough to possess this much; for the life of the person who is active in accordance with excellence will be happy.⁴⁸

The final lines of the passage imply that private persons who perform decent actions achieve happiness exactly because their lives are “active in accordance with excellence.” The language of the passage here makes it evident that by “excellence” Aristotle means moral excellence. Although he does not explicitly say that the private persons he is referring to actually have the moral excellences in accordance with which they act, there is no reason to deny that this is just what he means.⁴⁹ Aristotle is saying that the *exercise* of the moral excellences constitutes happiness for the private persons of whom he is speaking. He believes that whether one regularly exercises the practical excellences on an extensive scale—as does the

⁴⁸ 1178b33-1179a9.

⁴⁹ The expression *kata tēn aretēn* could suggest merely the idea of “action compatible with excellence” (as it clearly does at 1105a29) but it is quite unlikely that it does at 1179a9. For Aristotle regularly uses the expression to convey the notion that excellence is being *expressed* or *exercised*. Indeed, Aristotle uses the expression in exactly this way at least twice in 10.8 before the passage under consideration (1178a9 and 1178a21) and then after the passage he uses the parallel expression “the person who is active in accordance with the intellect” (*ho kata noun energōn* [1179a22-23]). Certainly, the latter expression cannot be thought to signify a person whose actions are merely *compatible* with the excellence of theoretical wisdom and not actually expressive of the state of theoretical wisdom. Surely the context ensures that it refers to a person who exercises the excellence of theoretical wisdom that she possesses. It is impossible to believe that in the passage under consideration Aristotle is without any warning suddenly attaching an unusual significance to his use of the word “*kata*” only to employ it soon afterwards in his ordinary fashion and *once again* without providing any warning or explanation for the reader.

politician—or in a more limited way in the sphere of one’s private relationships, one will attain happiness through the exercise of such excellences.

The issue now concerns whether the *philosophers* under discussion are included among the private persons who regularly exercise the moral excellences. It seems beyond doubt that they are at least included among those who exercise these excellences. We know that Aristotle has told us that they choose to act in accordance with the moral excellences, and the only others mentioned who so act are the politicians who exercise these excellences in a capacious way. Much of the rest of the *EN* suggests that *any* human being who possesses and regularly exercises the moral excellences will thereby attain happiness. So, if the philosopher’s private life involves the possession of, and exercise of the moral excellences, then the happiness within the life of the philosopher should be, at least partly, constituted by action in accordance with the moral excellences.⁵⁰ Note that in the *Politics*, Aristotle clearly

⁵⁰ There are also strong positive reasons to suppose that Aristotle holds that the philosopher’s happiness must be partly constituted by the exercise of the practical virtues. Here is one. Given Aristotle’s method of establishing his initial definition of the human good by reference to an *ergon* (function) that is *idion* (proper to, or distinctive of) a human being (in *EN* 1.7), it is difficult to understand how he could think that any form of human happiness could fail to include morally excellent and practically wise activities *as constitutive elements*. For Aristotle makes it clear, in the *EN*, as well as other treatises, that a human being is, essentially and distinctively, an animal that has the capacity to engage in practical reasoning, to control through reason his desires and emotions, and to share his life in associations with others. If *human* happiness, for Aristotle, consists *fundamentally* in the excellent actualizations of capacities that are essential to, and distinctive of, human beings, then it seems impossible for Aristotle to recognize a type of human happiness that fails to include (*as constitutive elements*) the excellent activities that pertain to the practical, desiderative, and social capacities of human beings. In light of this obvious problem, intellectualist interpreters often stress the fact that happiness, for Aristotle, is an ultimate end and in *EN* 10 Aristotle clearly has argued that the contemplative life has been shown to satisfy the criteria for an ultimate end better than any other end. But the ultimate end must be an end that is realizable by a human being, and this precisely why Aristotle emphasizes the fact that in so far as the philosopher is a human being living in communities with other human beings, he deliberately chooses to act in accordance with [practical] excellence (1178b5-7). It is true that Aristotle believes that the philosopher enjoys a kind of divine capacity for theoretical activity, but he recognizes that the philosopher is a human being. So, there are two forms of excellent activity that constitute or produce happiness for Aristotle: excellent contemplative activity, a divine activity, and excellent practical activity, a distinctively human activity. The philosopher *qua* divine being enjoys the happiness that is constituted by *theōria*. But the philosopher *qua* human being enjoys the happiness constituted by the excellent activity of what is distinctive of (*idion*) human beings, practical reason together with a faculty of desire that is susceptible to rational guidance. For

Timothy Roche

regards those who engage in the occupations of farming, commercial business, craft-work, etc. as incapable of developing the excellences whose exercise constitutes *eudaimonia* (*Pol.* 6.4, 1318b6-17, 4.6, 1292b25-29, 7.9, 1328b33-1329a2). The lack of leisure connected with these occupations, along with the distorting influence of the work that is the focus of these occupations, makes concentration on the development of moral excellence impossible. So, we may ask: who besides the politician is capable of the kinds of morally excellent activity that are central to human happiness? I maintain that besides politicians (at least those politicians who live in relatively stable political systems) Aristotle regards philosophers as either exclusively or predominantly capable of developing the excellences of character, and therefore they are both able and motivated to realize some part of their happiness through the exercise of their morally excellent states of character.

I suspect that a proponent of the intellectualist interpretation will resist this interpretation in a number of ways. Here are two considerations that might be urged against my interpretation. First, it might be said that the contemplative and political lives are understood to have different ultimate ends which structure those lives, the contemplative life has *theōria* as its ultimate end while the political life has excellent practical activity (deployed for the sake of the common good) as its ultimate end. Aristotle does not say, and indeed cannot say, that the contemplative life includes multiple ultimate ends (for that would require the impossibility that there is more than one end chosen just for its own sake and for the sake of which we choose all other ends, cf. *EN* 1.1-7), and therefore the exercise of practical excellences cannot be part of the ultimate end that constitutes the contemplative life. A second consideration would be that I have committed myself to the view that Aristotle has structured the account of *eudaimonia* in the *EN* around the image of the three most favored types of life, and his description of those lives indicates that he believes each of them is organized around a single good which reveals what kind of life it is. The apolaustic life is organized around the pursuit of bodily pleasure, the political life is the life that aims just at grand-scale excellent moral activity, and the theoretical life strives for excellent contemplative activity. The lives are not described as combinations of goods.

In response to the first objection, it should be noted, first, that it is difficult to see how a proponent of the intellectualist interpretation can maintain either that Aristotle's contemplative person is not a morally excellent person (without thereby

Aristotle, a contemplative being whose happiness consists solely and simply in its contemplative activity is not a human being. It is a god.

The Practical Life, the Contemplative Life, and the Perfect *Eudaimonia*

embracing the inconsistency interpretation) or that the contemplative person is a morally excellent person but does not, somehow, derive some measure of her happiness in virtue of the exercise of her moral excellence. For Aristotle makes it clear that the morally excellent person is one who takes pleasure in exercising the moral excellences, loves the excellences, and loves the doing of fine actions (*EN* 1.8, 1099a7-24). Taking pleasure in and loving excellent activity characterizes the philosopher's own state in relation to contemplative activity, activity that constitutes the primary component of the perfect happiness. It is not easy to understand how acting in accordance with practical excellences constitutes happiness for the good politician but fails to constitute any sort of happiness when the philosopher performs the same kinds of excellent acts. Second, it may be a mistake to think that the case of a morally good philosopher who possesses some portion of his happiness from the exercise of the moral excellences makes it necessary to say, absurdly, that he has two ultimate ends. In the first place, the notion of ultimate end is employed by Aristotle to make *eudaimonia* the subject of discussion in the opening chapters of the *EN*. It is not until book 10 that Aristotle divides *eudaimonia* into a perfect or complete happiness and a secondary happiness. Aristotle's view may well be that there is one ultimate end for human beings, excellent activity, and that ultimate end can (and perhaps must) be realized in different ways depending upon the different circumstances, talents, resources, and interests of different human beings. The perfect *eudaimonia* has a partly divine element in it due to the fact that the god(s) engage in contemplative activity and nothing else. Some human beings can achieve this form of *eudaimonia* due to their capacity for *theōria*. But they remain human and so have both limits to the extent and kind of *theōria* they can engage in as well as the capacity for and need to exercise practical excellences. Excellent politicians, on the other hand, also realize the ultimate end of *eudaimonia* but in a secondary way in virtue of their expansive exercise of the practical virtues within the public domain and for the sake of the political community. I do not think that Aristotle would sanction talk of *choosing* one's ultimate end. Human beings *have* one ultimate end in virtue of the kinds of living things they are. But they realize their ultimate end in different ways because of the reasons just given.

Given these points, it is perhaps easier to see now how it is possible to reply to the second objection. It is true that Aristotle characterizes the three types of life in terms of a single good around which the life in question is organized. But this does not, I think, pose a serious problem for the interpretation offered here. In the first

place, the three lives image is surely an oversimplification of the kinds of life human beings actually live. It serves Aristotle's purpose to the extent that it focuses our attention on the sorts of goods that we regard as very important to us and the image probably should not be taken to suggest that Aristotle believed that human beings can only have one such good around which they organize their lives. In my view, his belief that the human good must be a self-sufficient end (cf. *EN* 1.7) suggests that lives built around the pursuit of a single value cannot be genuinely or unqualifiedly happy (although some proponents of the intellectualist interpretation may disagree with this as well). But secondly, even though Aristotle explicitly claims that the morally good philosopher will often engage in excellent practical activities (*because she is human*), the primary component of her happy life is nonetheless *theōria* (*EN* 10.8, 1178a9-14, 1178b1-8).⁵¹ This is the case not because the philosopher fails to achieve any sort of happiness through the exercise of her morally excellent and practically wise actions, but simply because her theoretical activities constitute the central or typifying component of her happiness. That her happy life counts as a contemplative life is due to the fact that it is contemplative activity that most distinguishes her life from what Aristotle regards as the only other type of life that could plausibly count as happy—the excellent political life.⁵²

⁵¹ Note that Aristotle does not say that practically excellent activity is intrinsically good and included in happiness because it approximates excellent theoretical activity—as one would expect if Richardson Lear's interpretation was correct. Rather, because one is a human being and has both a practical intellect and a desiderative and emotional part of the soul, the exercise of excellences pertaining to these parts must be included in any form of happiness that a human being might attain.

⁵² One should not infer from this claim that a human being who engages in morally excellent activity within her private life cannot attain some measure of her happiness from that activity. Although Aristotle takes excellent contemplative activity and excellent political activity to be the central or typifying goods of the two types of happy lives he discusses in *EN* 10, it is clear now that both the excellent contemplative life and the excellent political life involve practical wisdom and that practical wisdom and full excellence of character mutually imply one another (*EN* 10.7, 1178b5-7, *EN* 6.8, 12-13). Aristotle tells us at the beginning of *EN* 6.8 that *politikē* and *phronēsis* are the same state (*hexis*), even though their being is not the same. I take this claim to mean that the terms refer to the same state or disposition but they are defined differently. But this is so only because *phronēsis* is not necessarily deployed in the most extensive service of the common good, as it is when it takes the form of *politikē*. However, this seems to be a difference of scale or direction, not a genuinely fundamental difference. Consequently, in so far as the excellence of *phronēsis* is exercised in a complete human life (and accompanied, necessarily, with excellence of character), it

The Practical Life, the Contemplative Life, and the Perfect *Eudaimonia*

should have an implication similar to the same sort of exercise as the excellence of *politikē*, namely, some level of *eudaimonia*.